"The living legend of literary mayhem." – Richard Laymon

Nipping Them in the Bud

EDWARD LEE

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Sharsted rarely remembered his dreams, and when he did, they were almost never nightmares. But this?

“This is definitely a nightmare,” he thought.

What did it look like? He could not see anything, because everything that stretched before his eyes was woven from pitch darkness. It might as well be locked in a shipping container and completely buried a hundred feet deep. Not the slightest speck of light penetrated its confines.

And what were its limits? Nothing was said in advance - of course not; he couldn't see anything. Although he felt his own body in the darkness: arms, chest, legs, and so on. He felt that his legs were stretched out, but there was no feeling that he was standing on something, say, the floor.

So he was swimming? Like someone in a sensory deprivation chamber? Well no, because he could feel some things; not only touch, but also hear. For example, he could hear his heartbeat and his own breathing. When he scratched his nose, he heard a scratching sound. And yet he felt more and more like he was somehow floating, like someone in a very deep pool of black ink.

Then he heard something else, or thought he heard it. Very, very distant moans? Wandering, incomprehensible words? He tried to scream; Nothing but a fragile creaking sound seemed to come out of his throat. He could hear the air rushing in and out of his lungs, so at least that was something.

He stretched his arms out as far as he could, hoping to feel something meaningful, like a wall, a door, or some kind of support structure, but his efforts were not rewarded. He seemed to be immersed in nothing more than dead black space, and although he could hear the voices of other people in the distance around him, no explanation occurred to him as to where he might actually be, or what the circumstances were.

He simply existed there.

He simply occupied a place in some indescribable country, full of blackness.

Time, although it was impossible to calculate, seemed to drag on to such an extent that he, Sharsted, felt that he could easily have been here for weeks or months, and nothing - absolutely nothing - had happened.

The sounds he seemed to hear remained distant and vague, but then his brain began to work more subjectively, as the human brain usually does in certain cases. Sharsted thought:

“This is fucked up, but it would be even MORE fucked up if all of a sudden rotten hands reached out and started poking me in the face, and then their lips pressed right to my ear and screamed.”

This is approximately what happened exactly after this thought occurred to him.

Hands burst out of the invaluable blackness and began to paw at his face, feeling, poking, just as a blind man might feel someone else’s face in order to “see” him. But these hands were not rotten; they were only cool and very dry, and there seemed to be a desperation in their movements, as if their owner was frantic to make sure that Sharsted was really present.

They continued to feel, poke and pinch, but did not stop with their blind examination of Scharsted's face. They moved along the front of his neck, down his chest, and even groped between his legs. What happened next was worse: an invisible mouth opened near his face, licked his eyes, nose, cheeks, and then sucked on his lips. Eventually the tongue entered Sharsted's mouth, wandering around his mouth as if it needed confirmation that there was something alive inside.

What next?

Another pair of lips pressed against his ear and screamed as high and loud as a train whistle and...

...and Sharsted woke up, almost screaming, in the more familiar and less frightening darkness of his bedroom. A knife-sharp pain flared around his heart.

"Damn! Am I dying?" - and he fell out of bed - DRY! - and reached for his mobile phone.

When he finally found the phone, the pain in his chest subsided. He wanted to call 911.

“Damn... DAMMIT!” he thought when his heart stopped beating fast. “What a terrible nightmare! Fuck this crap!”

Sharsted was old, and if not old, then no longer young. He had long since adjusted to living alone because he knew he was too selfish for any woman to worry about, and that was okay. But he felt old when he got up from the floor and hobbled over to get some water.

"What now?" he wondered, because he knew that after a nightmare of this intensity, he would never sleep again.

He swallowed and looked around the dark, quiet confines of his apartment, almost expecting to see ghosts. Maybe one day he'll even see his own.

It was not even midnight when sleep tore him out of oblivion. He got dressed and left; Although it was not a feeling he experienced often, he believed that being around other people was the best thing to do, and luckily, his favorite Chinese restaurant, Zung Fuzhou, was open until three in the morning.

Just a ten minute walk took him there, and soon he was sitting at the bar, a place where he always felt content. The entire establishment gave him peace of mind, since he was a man very tired of the present, and he was much more comfortable remembering the past.

Zung Fuzhou was one of those rare old-school Chinese restaurants that he remembered from the 60s and 70s: crimson wallpaper complemented by gold grille, a dark red carpet with dragons, smiling Buddhas everywhere and an extensive mural in the room. A Hong Kong restaurant before the communists took it back.

Even at this hour the restaurant was half full. But only one other client occupied the seating area. Sharsted looked at himself, a sullen figure, in the bright mirrored panels behind the liquor shelves, where funny cocktails like Zombies and Suffering Bastards were regularly prepared. Sharsted ordered a bottle of Tsing Tao and a traditional glass. These small glasses made the beer last longer.

The manager, whose name was Tony but everyone called him Kung Fu, greeted Scharsted with his usual gushing gratitude, and then Scharsted ordered "the usual" - a plate of rumaki and salt and pepper squid.

“Oh, so you ordered rumaki,” said the only visitor to the bar.

He was a strange man of indeterminate age, pear-shaped, dressed in a white shirt and red tie, with a dark mustache, but only the remnants of gray hair on his bald head. The man was so fat that Sharsted thought of "Wimpy Kid" from Popeye the Sailor.

“This is the only place in the area that I know of that still offers it,” Sharsted commented.

- I think most people don't like it - I mean young people. They can't accept the idea of chicken liver. But me? I can eat this all day.

That's when he noticed that this other man, who as mentioned was overweight, had ordered rumaki himself along with a bunch of pork fried rice.

“Damn,” Sharsted thought. “Is he going to eat all this?”

“I’m here for the same reason,” the man said. - I like authenticity. Rumaki, as well as dim sum and moo gu gai pan, are the only dishes you will find in an authentic Chinese restaurant in China. Everyone else is American bastards. For example, in China you will not find sweet and sour pork, shrimp and lobster sauce, or General Tso's Chicken.

Sharsted raised an eyebrow.

- Seriously? I didn't know that.

“Take my word for it, it’s true,” but then “Wimp” grinned. - However, there really was a General Tso in the mid-1800s. He was one of China's most experienced warlords and has an interesting story, but you might not want to listen to it while eating.

Sharstead shrugged.

- I'm not squeamish, if that's what you mean. So what's up?

- Okay, you asked for it yourself. Around 1850, the Russians—China's historical enemies—had a habit of sending troops across the border and raiding Chinese villages. I mean they killed men, women and children without remorse. Well, whenever such invasions occurred, the Emperor sent the illustrious General Tso to take care of matters, which I believe was the right decision. He took about twenty thousand people, outflanked the Russians and killed them on the spot. Then they made huge fires and - guess what? They roasted Russian soldiers and had a real feast.

Sharsted's face seemed to lengthen.

- You mean... they ate them...

- Yes, actually. They ate Russian soldiers, and ate heartily. Sometimes they lasted for several days. Then when they were done, all these Chinese soldiers would come across the border into Russia and... guess what they did?

Sharsted said nothing.

- Uh-uh, I can’t even imagine, no.

“They stood side by side, twenty thousand people, and then squatted down and, well, defecated!” This was their calling card. The next day, Russian reinforcements found twenty thousand piles of excrement along the edges of their border. It was as if the Chinese were saying, "If you come

into our country, we will not only slaughter you, but we will eat you. We will feast on your brave soldiers. We will feed on their flesh, and then drive your once valiant troops out of our asses." After several such demonstrations, you can bet that the Russians never crossed that border again. Quite an effective tactic - ah, but I see that you don't believe me. No matter; nevertheless it is true. While there never actually was a dish called General Tso's Chicken, it is quite possible that there was a dish called General Tso's Man.

Sharsted grinned and made a "cheers" gesture with his glass.

- To put it mildly, a fascinating story.

- Despite its morbidity, cannibalism has existed since the very beginning of mankind. And this was considered a legal way of revenge. When your enemy insults you, eat your enemy and then enjoy the satisfaction of pushing him out of your ass the next day. The perfect terror tactic, the perfect act of revenge, the perfect middle finger. Don't you think so?

Sharsted, although he assumed he should have agreed, was stunned by the improbability of this short conversation. Of course, he had read more than once about historical cannibalism and even cases of American troops eating Japanese soldiers, having learned that the Japanese were ordered to cook and eat the meat of American prisoners in labor camps.

“This is the oldest law in history: an eye for an eye,” quoted “Weakling.” - Do me bad, and I will do even worse to you, and then maybe you will learn a lesson. And if you don't heed this warning, you'll become the next pile of poop on earth...

“Yes, this is a good lesson,” Sharsted remarked, unable to think about anything else.

"Wow, this guy is a unique conversationalist..."

Then, completely unexpectedly, “Weakling” said:

- This nightmare was real bullshit, right?

Sharsted's gaze settled on him.

- What did you say?

His train of thought was interrupted when Tony walked in to see if they were satisfied. Sharsted was ready to lavish the standard compliments, but suddenly Tony looked past him, and his eternal smile was replaced by a blank expression of fear.

“Any of you idiots move,” said a voice from behind, “I’ll smash your brains and your chicken food all over this damn ceiling!”

Snap!

"Armed robbery," Sharsted realized.

Something he had never experienced before.

He glanced again at the mirror behind the counter. The robber looked like Frank Zappa in a Misfits sweatshirt. But he held a large silver revolver, moving back and forth between Sharsted, Tony and "Wimp". A huge pistol, the diameter of which was probably large enough to accommodate a grown man's thumb.

“Holy shit,” Sharsted thought coolly.

The tip of the revolver pushed him; was given a plastic bag.

- Wallet and mobile phone. In the package.

Sharsted's breath caught in sudden horror.

“Yes, of course,” he said, putting his wallet and phone in the bag.

The package said: WE APPRECIATE YOUR WORK! HAVE A GOOD DAY! And there was also a smiley face on it.

- You're smart for a useless old nag! - and then the robber thrust the package at Tony, who was standing behind the counter with his hands up. - You. Charlie Chan. If you're not tired of serving egg rolls and Poo-Poo bowls, put your phone and wallet in the bag.

Tony did this with a pale face.

- Now give this to Mr. Potato Head.

He meant "Weakling". But when Tony started to take the bag, there was a loud slap!

Sharsted didn't know what happened; he was too busy and scared, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the robber fly off his feet and crash into the red and gold wall with his back. A stream of blood seemed to escape from his lips and teeth popped out of his mouth. The gun fell to the floor with a thud and landed in front of the take-out area.

"What the hell was that?"

Now the criminal lay on the floor, crumpled and unconscious.

- What the hell? - Tony exclaimed.

The "weakling" stood up and pointed directly at Sharsted.

- Wow! Did you see this?! This brave man just knocked down a robber!

"Did I do it?" - Sharsted thought in confusion.

- Wait, no. No, I don't...

Tony chuckled.

- You are a hero! You saved us from this crap!

“No, really, I...” began Sharsted, but at the same moment “Weakling” looked him straight in the eye, shook his head negatively and raised his index finger, as if showing something like “be quiet, I’ll explain later.”

Tony was almost apoplectic with excitement. He grinned broadly at Sharsted and noted:

- You may have saved my life! And that guy too, and maybe the whole restaurant! From now on you eat here for free!

"Oh man..."

- Thank you, Tony, but this is not necessary...

Tony didn't hear any of this. He called the police, then gallantly raised his weapon and pointed it at the unconscious robber, while Sharsted, shoulders slumped, ate the rest of the rumaki.

- How was your night, huh? - said “Weakling” and winked.

The police arrived, took statements and dragged the criminal away in handcuffs. An attractive blonde from the newspaper took a photograph of Scharsted.

- It's him, right here! Tony said, pointing. - He's a hero!

When Sharsted dejectedly opened the fortune cookie, it read, “TODAY YOU WILL MEET SOMEONE WHO WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE.”

But when he looked at the other end of the bar, "Wimp" was no longer in sight.

The next day, Sharsted woke up just as confused, if not more so, than the night before.

He hoped that maybe it was a dream until he turned on his computer and saw local news headlines on his browser page.

HEROIC LOCAL MAN FIGHTS ARMED ROBER AT CHINESE RESTAURANT.

"You've got to be kidding me," he thought, rubbing his eyes.

There was a garish digital photo of Sharsted smiling awkwardly as he sat at a bar stool, right in front of some rumaki and salt-and-pepper squid. Tony smirked behind him, recording it on camera. Another photo showed police pushing a very drunk Frank Zappa into the back of their car.

"Well, well..."

Sharsted, who was now retired, used to sit and watch Tube most of the time because it was free. He decided to watch "The Amityville Karen," "Amityville Emmanuel" and "The Amityville Wet T-shirt Contest." Even single men Sharsted's age felt the urge to masturbate from time to time, but Sharsted resisted the urge... until the last woman at the Amityville Wet T-shirt Contest took off her top...

“Funny,” he thought, throwing away the napkin.

Could hackers get into his cable line and somehow watch him through his TV screen? Such a prospect seemed impossible, but he had read about such things many times.

"Damn it. Who cares?"

Around seven o'clock in the evening there was a knock on the door.

"Don't they see the Do Not Disturb sign?"

He HATED it when people knocked on his door!

"THERE IS NO REASON FOR ANYONE TO KNOCK ON MY DOOR!"

He grumbled as he walked towards the door, then looked through the peephole.

"What the fuck?"

There was a fat guy from the bar. It was "Wimp".

Sharsted opened the door, mouth parted.

- We met again! - said "Weakling". - How are you, Mr. Sharsted?

Sharsted never told the guy his name; no doubt he read it in a news article. But...

- How do you know where I live? - he asked suspiciously.

- Oh, I, uh... took your address from a book.

- Do telephone books still exist?

- To him.

“By the way, your photograph in the newspaper is excellent,” “Weakling” winked. - I guess you can thank me for that.

Sharsted could only stand with his mouth open and his hand on the handle.

-Aren't you going to invite me? - another wink. - I'm not a vampire.

Sharsted paused, then stepped back and allowed the man to enter.

The "weakling" walked straight into the room, looking around the dull apartment.

- The maid has the day off, right? “I’m just kidding,” he looked out the patio window. “So I'm sure you're aware that something serious happened last night.”

Sharsted guessed it.

- You can say that...

- I'm the one who knocked out the robber, but you should already know that.

- This is impossible. I was there, remember? You were at least fifteen feet away from him when the asshole fell to the floor. I know I didn't do it, but you didn't have the chance... unless you did - what's the word? - using telekinetic abilities.

“I have telekinetic abilities,” said “Wimp” casually.

-Are you serious?

“But it doesn’t really matter,” the strange man was now looking around the kitchen. - And by the way, my name is not “Wimp.” I mean, I know I look like the fat guy from Popeye the Sailor, but... hey. It's a shame.

The script mixed threads of Scharsted's thought processes.

"Okay, okay, wait... What's going on here?"

- The only way to know that I consider you a "Wimp" is if you are psychic.

- I am a psychic and telekineticist. Among other things, he opened several cabinets. - Do you have peanut butter?

- No. What's happening? This is crazy,” Sharsted said, straining his patience.

- This is what I just want to tell you. And, if you want to know, my name is Raguel,” the man’s eyes lit up near the closet. -Can I have some of this popcorn?

“Of course,” Sharsted muttered. - So, Raguel? A foreign name, I take it? Where are you from?

The man, Raguel, winced as he ate a handful of popcorn.

- This thing is dry! Close the bag each time. Take one of these clips.

- Where are you from? - Sharsted asked again.

“You can say that I am from the fields of the Nephilim,” Raguel grinned. - I'm kidding. But you're not quite ready to believe where I'm really coming from, yet. You will probably be there by morning. Come on, let's get out of here. This place is a dump.

- Thank you very much...

The entrance to Scharsted's apartment complex was on a street called Seminole Boulevard; The main road to the north, it passed many restaurants, bars and shopping centers.

Raguel took over the duties of navigator. In front of them, a straight dark street went to a vanishing point into infinity, dotted with traffic lights. Raguel turned at the next corner. But as soon as Sharsted asked where they were going, they stopped when they saw several police cars filling the road. Sharsted looked carefully and said:

- Oh shit...

It was a traffic accident - not uncommon in this area at night. The wheelchair overturned and was crushed. Also crushed, about twenty feet away, lay the owner of the wheelchair: crooked in the road, with knees and elbows bent at unnatural angles and a twisted neck. The man's head could resemble a broken melon, in the center of which was a huge shining halo of black blood.

“Accident,” Raguel said under his breath.

- This is fucking terrible. If the driver escapes responsibility, for me it will be proof that there is no God.

It was an uncharacteristic comment from Sharsted - he almost never expressed such opinions in front of others, but this time the words came out of his mouth thoughtlessly.

Raguel's grin turned into a tight half-smile.

“We’ll all be there eventually,” he said, pulling something out of his pocket.

Sirens could be heard in the distance; an ambulance, without a doubt. Sharsted didn't like to show morbid curiosity, but something caught his attention, the way the crushed victim looked: a white guy in his thirties. The size of the pool of blood screamed at Sharsted; he could not imagine that there was so much blood in one person. But indignation seized him when he looked at Raguel.

- Are you kidding me?! Are you photographing a dead guy?

At first it seemed so. Raguel was holding what appeared to be a brass cigarette case, but when opened, the device had small round lenses on one side and two tiny eye holes on the other.

“This is not a camera,” Raguel muttered to the side, looking through the holes.

Sharsted recalled seeing similar items, such as theater binoculars or mini binoculars, which were often sold at yard sales or flea markets. But...

- So what the hell are you looking at? The guy is dead. Don't tell me you're one of those ghouls who likes looking at corpses.

“It's called Blasphemy Scanner, Model 7-A7,” Raguel said and handed it to Sharsted. - Look at the dead guy.

Sharsted hesitantly took the cigarette case-like device and brought it to his eyes. Then...

"What the hell is this?"

At first he thought it was really one of those virtual reality things that you could wear like glasses to watch movies and play games. But what he saw was neither a film nor a game. He didn't see a crushed wheelchair on the road, or a dead man with a crushed head - in fact, he didn't see the road at all. Instead, he saw something like a scene from a movie, and...

It was just... disgusting.

A skinny young man was kneeling in the forest. His pants were down. Along with other junk such as wheelless bicycles, several flat tires on bent rims, and several rotten suitcases lying open and empty, there lay a rusty bathtub frame full of a goulash of black water and dried leaves.

The young man was kneeling in front of the bathtub, experiencing a throbbing erection. He had a naked teenage girl with him and he held her head underwater in the bathtub. He let her go several times when she was about to drown, and then pushed her head back in again. After several cycles of this, his victim went limp. The skinny young man wasted no time in raping the girl from behind while her head was still submerged in the water.

Sharsted felt a tingling sensation in painful shock, on the verge of vomiting. He handed the device back to Raguel.

- What the hell was that?

“Past affairs,” Raguel pointed to the corpse on the street. - This is just the tip of the iceberg for this gentleman, believe me. He raped and/or murdered at least a dozen little girls before he was shot during a drug deal gone bad. Paralyzed from the waist down. Poor guy, huh? Boooo... I just wish we'd gotten to it a lot sooner.

Sharsted's anger filled him.

- What the hell are you... are you talking about, dude? Are you telling me that these binoculars reveal a person's past?

“Yeah,” Raguel continued walking. - Past or future. This can be selected.

- Sorry, but I have to call it bullshit. How do you explain this?

Raguel shrugged.

- The Blasphemy Scanner, Model 7-A7, can show a person's past or future - I mean his sins. His worst crimes - he stalled. - Sorry, I'm speaking politically incorrectly. I have to talk about his or her past. Or... their past. I'm not very good with pronouns. I'm old school.

Sharsted followed the obese man's shadow, which looked like a giant avocado.

- This is fucking crazy! - he could not maintain a coherent line of thought. And there was something else, wasn't there? - And what did you say last night? Something about my nightmare? I don't believe that you could know about my nightmare.

- Why not? When you asked me if I was psychic, I told you the truth. I said yes.

Sharsted stomped after him.

- Okay, then what kind of nightmare did I have?

- It was as if you were floating in a place completely devoid of light. Nothing was visible in any direction, right? And it seemed to you that from afar you could hear people talking or even screaming. Am I close?

“Damn,” Sharsted thought. “Am I going crazy? Is this what madness is? Is this guy a hallucination?”

- Let's go here! - said Raguel, beaming. It was a diner with a sign that said "CAPTAIN SALTIE'S PRAWN SAUCE - $15.00. 2 POUNDER LOBSTER GIVEAWAY TONIGHT!"

- Damn, dude. This is a place for wild hillbillies.

- Come on, maybe we can win the lobster!

Sharsted followed him into a dark, catacomb-like establishment. Loud, shitty music; drunk rednecks in baseball caps eat French fries and fried shrimp, some guys play pool, others smoke cigarettes under NO SMOKING signs, baseball is on TV.

- Let's sit here! - Raguel's big face grinned. - It's very vital, isn't it?

“I think...” and they both took seats at the bar.

A shabby blonde barmaid with dark circles under her eyes came up close. She had great breasts, but that was about it.

- My name is Marcy. What will you do?

“Two beers plus whatever you want at my expense,” said Raguel.

- Oh, how sweet!

- You better hope they don't have Louis XIII here. This thing costs a hundred bucks,” Sharsted noted.

- If they do it, I can afford it. But she'll probably want a Fireball for herself. I prefer beer - it is the oldest alcoholic drink on Earth. History in every sip.

- Whatever it is... Tell me...

- Be patient. Strive for Job’s patience, this is a very positive character trait,” Raguel said. - I'll start with a quote. "Remember this night, because this is the beginning of eternity." This is Dante,” he looked straight at Sharsted.

- Fine. What do I care?

“You are so naive, inattentive and linear in your thinking that at first you won’t believe anything I say.”

- I? - Sharsted was surprised. - Am I naive, inattentive and linearly thinking?

He considered this too harsh an assessment.

“The nightmare you had wasn’t really a nightmare.” It was a vision of the future. You were in Purgatory - that's what this place is. You're not a bad person, but you're not the best person either. When you die, you won't be bad enough to go to hell, but you won't be good enough to go to heaven either. Here's your chance to change that. Very, very few people get this opportunity.

The beer was supplied: "Busch Light" in plastic cups. Sharsted was now so mentally confused that he didn't even glance at the barmaid's spectacular cleavage, but not so mentally confused that he forgot to frown when he took his first sip of cool beer.

- Would you like to take part in the lobster draw, my dears? - asked Marcy. - It's only five bucks.

“Of course, my dear,” as if by magic, Raguel took out a five-dollar bill and handed it to her. In return, she gave him a ticket. - I'm very lucky today, Marcy. I bet I'll win.

“Maybe, but most likely not,” she told him. - More than a dozen people are already participating.

- Ah, then we'll see, won't we?

“What the hell is going on here?” Sharsted wondered. “And what am I doing, sitting here with this strange weirdo?”

- You said what? Few people get such a chance? Chance like what?

Raguel drank half the beer in one gulp.

- A chance to secure your place in Heaven after death.

- But how can you know this? Do you know when I'll die?

- I know.

- When?

“I don’t have to talk,” Raguel looked at Sharsted again. - You believe in God, right?

Sharsted's nose wrinkled.

- I don't know. Yes. Perhaps not. May be. Ummm... Probably.

- I think this is a good start.

- So? Looking through binoculars, can you tell when someone is going to die?

- No, no, no. The Blasphemy Scanner is just an identification tool. He shows us the misdeeds of a person's past and future, as well as his inherent readiness. We use it to make decisions.

- Decisions, huh? - Sharsted was now sitting with his elbow on the bar and his chin in his palm.

“I am Kaliginaut, Mr. Sharsted,” came Raguel’s next abstruse statement. - You don't know what it is, so I'll tell you. Kaliginaut is a special type of angels...

- Oh, so you're an angel? Now I understand.

- Like any society, there is a system in Heaven. It's a bit like many governments today, but we call it Triquetra.

“Trichetra,” Sharsted muttered. - Oh yes, I heard about it.

- Executive power, representative power and judicial power. Here's how you can imagine it. First, of course, is the executive branch. Well, you know. A guy, one dude, he's at the top, running the show. God, if you like. And there is no vote for His presence or exclusion. He's there forever.

- Not much democracy...

- I never said that this is democracy! - Raguel barked. - We simply adopted some elements of this system of government. But of course God cannot be re-elected. This would be absurd and an insult to logic. After all, God is the only perfect being. He created everything.

Sharsted waved his hand.

- This is wonderful.

“You know, you started to irritate me,” Raguel frowned slightly. - But, as I said, there are three parts. The second is something like a representative government - Congress, Parliament and the like. And thirdly, the judiciary - the Kaliginauts are part of it.

“Judges,” Sharsted suggested, continuing the meaningless conversation.

- In a sense, yes. We do God's dirty work. We are his servants of righteousness and temporary enemies of the Adversary.

Sharsted finished his first beer - it was terrible and smelly - and ordered another.

“I have nothing else to do, so why not listen?”

Raguel continued.

- It goes cyclically. Here, congressmen are elected every two years, senators every six years. The old is often rejected and replaced by the new.

- I know. A long time ago I went to school...

“Well, there are voting cycles in Heaven too,” Raguel said, but looked around at all the boring visitors. -Have you ever noticed that the first fifty years of the twentieth century were exponentially worse than the second fifty years? The first fifty years saw two of the worst and deadliest wars in history. Numerous economic collapses, the Dust Bowl, locust plagues and the Spanish Flu pandemic, which killed more people than the Black Death. Something like that. But in the second fifty years, of course, there were wars, outbreaks of disease, rise of dictators and all that. But that was a drop in the bucket compared to those first fifty years or so, right?

Sharsted drank another beer, thought about it, drank another beer, and then said:

- Yes, probably.

- Well, you see, our cycles change periodically. The new Heavenly Parliament was elected around 1950.

“What you're saying is the stupidest thing I've ever heard,” Sharsted muttered.

- For you, yes. You have limited thinking. You are human.

- Aren't you?

- No, I told you, I...

- You are an angel.

- Kaliginaut...

Marcy, the bartender of this fading establishment, came up and announced:

- In a few minutes we will choose the winner of the lottery! Cross your fingers.

“Of course we will,” Raguel told her enthusiastically.

But Sharsted barely heard her. This time he was looking at her tempting cleavage and large braless breasts with tapered nipples poking out from the fabric of her tight ZZ Top T-shirt.

“Damn,” he thought.

Raguel frowned.

- Seriously, Mr. Sharsted. At least try to resist such impulses. Lust is a grave sin.

Sharsted took a quick glance at Raguel's huge belly, thighs and sides.

- How gluttony, yes?

Raguel's friendly expression faded.

- This is very insulting, Mr. Sharsted. I'm doing you a favor, remember? It's inappropriate to insult me.

- Sorry. I just refuted your statement by pointing out an obvious contradiction.

Raguel shook his head regretfully.

- A thousand years ago I would have sent you packing for that comment. And some of my comrades would have done much worse.

This was getting funny.

- For example, how?

- It’s the same as letting the Crimean Tatars take you prisoner. Do you have any idea what they did with the penises of captured invaders?

“Penises,” Sharsted thought in the fog that appeared.

“Okay, I apologize for implying that you are guilty of the sin of gluttony,” he still took another quick glance at his escort's belly. - So, you can continue this impossible monologue.

- Very good. As I said before, there are voting cycles in Heaven just like there are here. Elections to the Heavenly Parliament are one such example. But we, the Kaliginauts, exist in the Heavenly Court. Parliament changes laws through various regulations. This happened quite recently. And now we, members of the Heavenly Court, have changed our job responsibilities. We are now allowed to change the future for the benefit of the Treaty of Goodwill. Are you following my thought this far?

“Of course,” Sharsted said and ordered a third beer. - Change the future.

“It has changed back and forth several times over the millennia. At least for now we are allowed to, well, balance the situation, monkey around on the scales, so to speak. We are allowed to nip events in the bud. You'll understand more as you go.

“What am I DOING with this guy?” Sharsted asked himself. “I should be sitting back at home watching Julie Ann Prescott movies on cable, but instead...”

“Now we have been given permission to nip them in the bud, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel continued with his little research. - Of course, modern sociological findings tell you that, for lack of a better term, bad people are not born, they are made. Do you understand this?

Sharsted's chin was in the palm of his hand again.

- Certainly. Serial killers, rapists, and so on become criminals due to their upbringing or due to the characteristics of their life experiences. They can't help the way they are because they are actually victims of a negative environment, mostly in childhood. If a small child is raped by his stepfather, uncle, teacher or anyone, then this is the reason why he becomes a rapist as an adult. If a little girl was trafficked by her drug addict mother, her prostitute mother, then the little girl becomes a drug addict and goes into prostitution later in life. And so on. Children grow up selling drugs in the ghetto because that's what their mothers and fathers did. Indoctrination of learned behavior. You grow up in a criminal environment, you yourself become a criminal. It's simple logic and it makes sense.

- So, monsters are created, not born?

- Yes.

Raguel raised a finger.

- And this is where you are wrong, Mr. Sharsted. Believe me, some people are just born evil. This is one of the most effective machinations of the devil, along with the spread of popular psychology and sociology. Satan makes great efforts to ensure that some children are born evil. They were born to become Lucifer's assistants and carry out his devilish orders. You may not want to believe it, but you can trust me. This is absolutely true, and it is a heartbreaking circumstance, especially for the voting members of the Heavenly Parliament. For a long time, the biggest question was: why not stop it early? And this was always rejected. But times change, Mr. Sharsted,

there as well as here. Now we are allowed to stop it before the damage is done." Raguel grinned and repeated, "We are allowed to nip them in the bud."

Sharsted quickly shook his head like a cartoon character.

“You mean...you're allowed to kill babies before they grow up to be rapists and murderers?”

- Well, yes, but not only babies. Everyone. Everyone who was born evil. It's one thing to be born ignorant of the Gospel. But it is quite another thing to know the Gospel and then to reject it with redoubled force; this is just another tactic of Satan. But now we can fight back. What if it doesn't work? - Raguel shrugged. - This question will be rejected and they will think about something else.

Sharsted noticed a pregnant woman hovering near one of the pool tables; she was wearing a T-shirt that said "IMMACCAL CONCEPT".

“Ah, I see you lust after this pregnant woman,” said Raguel.

- I'm not thirsty!

“Well, let’s see...” carefully, clasping his hands around the thing that looked like a cigarette case, he brought it to his eyes, looked quickly, and then put it away. - Ah, I'm glad to say that your pregnant friend was not born evil, but...

-You have to be kidding me! - Sharsted objected. “You tell me you work for God, and God says it’s okay to kill people before they do terrible things?”

- No, no, I said that the Heavenly Parliament did it. God does give His subjects some leeway in matters of self-government. We are not puppets, you know...

Sharstead clenched his teeth.

- This is stupid!

Raguel had no time to object to this statement when Marcy rang the bell and announced loudly:

- Listen, everyone, get your tickets! It's time to choose the winner of the giveaway!

The excited murmur intensified, and all eyes looked anxiously at the barmaid.

“And the winner is...” Marcie began, “seven-seven, seven-seven-seven, seven-seven.”

The excited murmur turned to groans of disappointment, and then the losing tickets fell to the floor.

- I won! - Raguel exclaimed, showing his ticket.

Sharsted looked at him askance.

Marsi, smirk, took a ticket.

- Still, you did it, sir. Do you want your lobster stuffed, baked or steamed?

- Hmm, wait a minute... I'll please choose stuffed and baked. And wrap it for me with you, if you don't mind.

- Yes, sir. Congratulations!

Sharsted was still looking askance at the corpulent man.

- Did you... set this up?

- I wouldn't say that.

- You did it, didn't you? - Sharsted looked at him in amazement. -You used some kind of angelic voodoo to achieve victory.

Raguel grinned.

- Mr. Sharsted, please don't change the subject. We're not talking about lobsters, we're talking about your destiny.

- About my fate?

- Don't you want to go to Heaven when you die?

The question seemed even more pompous to Sharsted.

- This is bullshit...

- No, it's a gift. As it stands, if you died at this point, you would go to Purgatory. Now how long you stay in Purgatory depends on you," Raguel turned his gaze to Sharsted. - You will remain there until you are sufficiently reconciled with God and accept the holy sacrifice of His Son. Maybe a week, maybe a thousand years. I don't know.

Sharsted just sat there with his jaw hanging open.

"Or," Raguel continued, "you can accept this gift with all your heart and bypass Purgatory and, ultimately, save many innocent people from terrible torment, death and torture." So you watched Purgatory. Your nightmare last night?

Sharsted continued to stare at the ridiculously overweight man. Indeed, he remembered this dream, the nightmare, too well, and this memory seemed to plunge his consciousness into a gloomy gloomy abyss. He didn't want to see this place ever again, and since Raguel seemed to know about the dream through some kind of psychic contact, perhaps...

"Maybe it's NOT nonsense. Maybe it's true, and maybe it's really as he says..."

“Yes,” Sharsted said in a serious voice. - I remember Purgatory and I don’t want to go there.

- Great! Now you are beginning to see the light,” Raguel smiled with some self-satisfaction. - So, do you agree to the terms?

Sharsted winced.

- What other conditions?

Raguel's eyes sparkled.

- I give you tasks. You complete these tasks. And when you die, you will go to Heaven. It's all pretty banal.

Sharsted was now finding it easier and easier to put two and two together.

"Nipping them in the bud..."

- So, I will go to Heaven when I die, but for this I will have to kill bad people?

- Right. There's a lot of ambiguity in your use of the word murder, but yes. You kill the people I tell you to do, the way I tell you to, and you... like Flynn, I think is rightly said.

Then he finished his next beer.

“Think, think!” Sharsted begged himself. “Do I really believe in this? It’s impossible, right?”

But when he looked through his binoculars, he saw a younger version of the guy in a wheelchair drowning and raping a teenage girl. How could this be possible without supernatural assistance? And Raguel described his nightmare with crystal clarity. Coincidence?

“I see,” Raguel noted. - You need more evidence...

- Yes.

“When you were seven years old, two bullies named Dickie McAvoy and Jim Meyers tied you to a tree with a dog chain, pulled down your pants, pissed on you, and then threw clods of dirt at you. Have you ever said this to anyone?

Sharsted instantly felt dizzy.

- N-no...

-You never even told your parents this?

- No, because they said that if I do this, they...

“They will kill your parents and your dog,” Raguel’s facial expression reflected some vague disappointment. - But I can’t remember the names of dogs for the rest of my life!

Sharsted felt like he was drowning.

“It was King,” he croaked.

- Yes, collie! And when you were in eighth grade, in Mrs. Christianson's science class, you...

- No!

- You masturbated in class, under the desk at the end of the room.

- You can't know that! Sharstead barked loud enough to turn several heads.

“Calm down, Mr. Sharstead,” Raguel whispered. - Don't make a scene.

Sharsted whispered furiously:

“You’d jerk off in class too if you had to look at her tits every day in class!”

- No, Mr. Sharsted, I assure you, I would not do that. Why? Because I am an angel dedicated to the eternal service of God. I willed myself not to be aware of lust. But you’re a fucking pervert,” the fat man tapped his finger on the counter. “When you were twelve years old, you stole art paints from the People's Store on Route 197 and...” Raguel grinned, “you got caught.”

- Fine! - Sharsted hastened with this word. - I believe you!

- Perfect. Now I'll ask you again. Do you agree to the terms?

Although Sharsted knew that this was impossible, he also knew that Raguel was in fact an angel.

"My destiny. To go to Heaven..."

- I have to tell you, it's looking more and more like a trick. It's like it's a deal with the devil, and when I agree, you'll grow horns and a tail.

“I give you my word as a servant of God Almighty, Mr. Sharsted, that nothing of the sort will happen.” I am not capable of deception, I do not know how to lie. So... don't waste your time, as I think is rightly said. Are you home or on business?

Sharsted felt numb from head to toe as he said:

- I'm in.

Raguel's bulbous face lit up.

“Then let’s take the righteous path,” he put a hundred dollar bill on the counter and stood up from his chair.

-What about your lobster? - Sharsted noted.

Raguel shrugged.

- I'm afraid there's no time. This barmaid can take it for herself. I'm sure she works hard.

Sharsted shook his head with a frown and followed the man.

He had not noticed before that the pregnant woman had left before them, but now she was standing there, on the corner of the house, smoking a cigarette.

“She shouldn’t smoke while she’s pregnant,” Sharsted couldn’t help but object.

- No, she shouldn't. Satan has corrupted God's Green Earth with innumerable mixtures of evil. I'm afraid people are people, and often they fall victim to such illnesses. Exactly the way Lucifer wants it,” then Raguel stopped in his tracks.

Dark thoughts began to stir in Sharsted's mind.

- Wait, wait, don’t tell me that I have to kill a pregnant woman...

- No, Mr. Sharsted. But since you agreed to the terms, you are expected to destroy the evil offspring that now resides in her womb.

Sharsted nearly fell.

- I'm not going to kill the damn child, asshole!

“You better refrain from insults, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel frowned and handed him the Blasphemy Scanner. - Look, what seems right to me, at the young lady's belly.

Sharsted took the device, brought his eye sockets to the holes and “clicked.”

One glance for half a second was enough for him to fly back in horror.

What he saw was this: a room - apparently a classroom - engulfed in roaring, crackling flames. Screams rang out in a frantic cacophony as the figures in the flames - small figures in most cases - convulsed and fell, many of them in wheelchairs.

- My God...

“Exactly,” said his colleague. “When the child in this woman's belly turns twenty-seven years old, he will block all the entrance doors of the school for disabled children, and then blow it up with a Molotov cocktail. Do you want to prevent this event? If you feel like the incentive isn't enough, take another look at the Blasphemy Scanner.

Sharsted stood almost paralyzed. He couldn't get the monstrous images out of his head.

- I don't think so.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Raguel pulled out what appeared to be a briefcase the size of a lunch box.

Sharstead snapped out of his frightened reverie.

- What is this?

- You can think of it as a toolbox for work. It contains everything you will need to complete the tasks you agreed to complete." From the drawer, he took out a large hypodermic syringe and handed it to Sharsted.

- No, you don't mean that I should...

-You stick this needle into the belly of a pregnant woman and press the plunger.

"No," Sharsted whispered coldly.

- If you don't do this, all these disabled children will be burned alive. Do your job, Mr. Sharsted. Save all these children...

Sharsted's hand shook as he accepted the syringe.

"She's not just going to stand there while I stick a needle in her damn stomach!" She will scream, she will run away. She'll call the police and they'll throw me in jail!

"None of this will happen," Raguel's patience seemed to be shaking again. - While you are so busy, the object of your task will immediately fall under the Paresis Spell - she will not be able to move. And you will be invisible, so she won't be able to see you and therefore won't be able to report you to the police. In fact, she won't be able to remember any of it. You have nothing to fear. I think that now everything I tell you has an impeccable authenticity.

Sharsted wasn't sure what he was going to say next because, despite himself, the pandemic images of all those children screaming, writhing, burning alive...

Sharsted turned like an automaton, waving the syringe. And he walked straight up to the pregnant woman.

She didn't see him; she didn't actually move as Sharsted lifted her T-shirt, revealing her swollen belly. The tip of the needle is stuck.

"Insert the needle into the child's skull," Raguel ordered.

- I don't know where the child's skull is!

- Have intuition. Just do it. Your newfound instincts as a performer will guide your hand without any conscious effort on your part.

Sharsted's eyes bulged. He leaned over and tuned in.

"I... Am I really doing this?"

He then stuck the needle into the lower half of her tight, swollen belly. The shiny skin on his belly was so tight that Sharsted could see a vague reflection of his face.

He inserted the needle further. It was a long needle, and it penetrated a few inches, but then stopped for a moment, as if it had encountered an obstacle, and then...

Sharsted nearly vomited when he felt, rather than heard, a tiny crunch as the needle went in all the way to the hilt.

He then emptied the syringe as instructed.

His blurred vision overwhelmed him. He staggered back as if blind. He began to turn and retreat to the direction Raguel had turned, but...

-You'll have to take her shorts off! - Raguel barked.

- What?

- Her shorts. Take them off; otherwise the child will not be able to come out! Do you really have no foresight at all?

A sound like a car's bearings failing filled his head. He returned to where the woman stood motionless, convinced her to sit on the ground, then removed her frayed cut-off jeans and panties. A floral message on the front of the panties read: "PIGGY BANK IS FULL."

Sharsted's consciousness entered his head again: the woman's pubic area was covered in sharp hairs, and even looking down, he could see the vulva widen as the perfect ball of the fetal head began to protrude.

“Get out of here,” he thought, stunned.

He just couldn't bring himself to watch the rest.

Some time later, he regained full consciousness and found himself walking along a dark suburban street with Raguel.

“You are amazingly inattentive, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel complained.

-You left the needle stuck in her stomach! I had to pick it up myself!

“Uh-uh,” said Sharsted. - Oh... Sorry.

- Doesn't matter, I got it back. But please pay attention to such things in the future.

They seemed to be walking through a pretty nice neighborhood.

- What are we doing here?

“We are leaving for your next mission,” Raguel replied.

Sharsted sighed.

- And where are we?

“I think we are in the Vinoy area of St. Petersburg,” Raguel cast a few approving glances at the large houses they passed and expensive sedans. - Quite chic, I see.

Alarmed, Sharsted looked at his watch; it was a little after eight o'clock in the evening.

- We could not have come here in the short time that has passed since we left the bar! We took a taxi and I just don't remember?

“No taxi, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel seemed to have difficulty pulling up his cargo shorts. - And we didn’t go for a walk. Let's just say I have a talent for covering distances without wasting any time.

“Another angelic voodoo,” Sharsted muttered.

- You can say that. We visit the home of a wealthy executive...

Sharsted stopped.

- And let me guess. I must kill the rich executive before he commits some terrible crime in the future.

- No, no, leave it to me. The rich executive isn't even at home right now. He is now having dinner with his wife in the city center. We're going to stop by and say hello to the rich executive's nanny.

Sharsted nodded, as cynically as he could.

“Come by and say hello” means I'll have to fucking kill the babysitter. Am I reading this correctly?

“You read this with crystal clarity, Mr. Sharstead.” The nanny's name is Linda. She is an attractive blonde and quite friendly when needed. She looks like a beautiful young lady who you would think is incapable of even a single ungodly thought.” Raguel raised a finger in an ineffective attempt to make the appropriate point. “Ah, but I think the saying is true: appearances can be deceiving.”

Sharsted shook his head at the stupid joke.

- And what did Linda do?

- You'll see when we get there.

A few minutes later they arrived at a large post-art deco house with roofs slanted at different angles. The estate was decorated with graceful bushes. Sharsted followed Raguel between two tall juniper spiers until they both looked out the living room window.

“Here she is,” Raguel noted.

“Here we go,” Sharsted thought.

It was an indecent sight to behold, but he had to admit that this nanny, Linda, was quite beautiful. At that very moment she stood upright, completely naked and bent at the waist, while an equally naked, tattooed young man stood behind her, copulating furiously, his ringed face contorted in the throes of anticipatory bliss.

“Damn,” Sharsted said. - This is some kind of show.

“It’s obvious that Linda invited her boyfriend over as soon as the child’s parents left,” Raguel shook his head, continuing to look inside. - I can add that obviously without the permission of the owners.

Soon the tattooed guy reached orgasm amidst meaty panting, snorting, hip swaying and ridiculous grimaces.

- Damn it, Pip! - Linda snapped over her shoulder. -Can't you hold out for more than a minute? You know, I want to cum too.

Pip sat bare-assed on the ten thousand dollar sofa.

- Sorry, baby. I'll have to satisfy you next time.

Linda turned naked and looked at what Sharsted had only now noticed: a crib. When Sharsted squinted, he saw the baby through the bars of the crib. It was...

“This is the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen,” Linda commented, leaning over the crib rail. - Little ugly bastard on golden sheets. I hate rich kids,” she then reached for the crib.

- What are you doing? - asked the tattooed guy.

- I'll pinch his little dick! I'll make that fat-faced little idiot cry!

The tattooed guy chuckled. All Sharsted could directly see was Linda, with a intent smile on her face, climbing into the crib and apparently pinching the baby's genitals. No wonder the baby started crying.

- Pip! His little balls look like olives!

- Oh, yes? Take a photo and post it on your Facebook!

Linda's face turned pink with anger.

“I can’t tell you how badly I want to beat both of his balls!”

- Yes, that would be cool, but his parents will take him to the doctor and then they will find out that you did it. You don't want to spend time in a cell with lesbians. Believe me, I know the girls who were there. They'll turn your face into a park bench.

- Ugh!

“But give him one more good and strong pinch, just like that,” said the tattooed guy.

Linda did so and burst out laughing obnoxiously as the volume of the child's harsh retorts doubled.

“She screwed up, yes,” Sharsted told his escort. “But should I kill her for pinching the baby’s penis and balls?”

“No, no, no, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel said, rolling his eyes. “You were assigned to kill her for killing her own children a few years later.” She is pure, unadulterated evil,” he handed Sharsted the Blasphemy Scanner again.

Sharsted without enthusiasm took the magical device and brought it to his eyes...

There was Linda, ten years older. She stood in what looked like a trailer kitchen, wearing a threadbare apron whose tight, sheer fabric emphasized the features of her breasts. She stood in front of the oven, and when she opened the oven, Sharsted saw that it was filled with a bright orange light and the dial on the handle of the roaster read 500.

Linda then pushed a pair of male twin babies into the oven and closed the door. She whispered to herself: "Hail Satan..."

- I've seen enough! Sharsted shouted, but when he tried to remove the Blasphemy Scanner, he found that he couldn't, no matter how hard he tried.

“It’s important for you to see this, Mr. Sharsted,” came Raguel’s gloomy, rasping answer. - Your tasks are not fleeting - you need to take it seriously. The fate of these twins depends on this.

Sharstead shuddered in place. His hands could not lower the Blasphemy Scanner. Some force—no doubt some force exerted by Raguel—kept his eyes glued to the holes.

The muffled sounds coming from the oven defied reasonable description, but then, after standing there for several minutes, smiling at the sound, her skin crawling, Linda opened the oven again to find two bright orange, bloated, twitching lumps, whose faces bubbled and hissed, whose tiny mouths twitched, opening and closing. Now that the children's screams of terror had died down, the only sound that could be heard was something like the hiss of steam.

Sharsted found himself unable to sleep a wink as he returned the Blasphemy Scanner.

- How can I do this?

“As you wish,” Raguel said good-naturedly. He smiled. - Be creative.

Sharsted walked leisurely to the front door. He heard the door open before he touched the handle and then walked through the cool, dark hall.

He went first to the kitchen, selected a particularly sharp knife from a drawer, then quietly moved into the living room, where Linda, still naked, kept telling her tattooed quick-fire boyfriend:

- Damn it, Pip! I told you! You can't smoke weed here! The Delaneys will feel it when they get home and then I'll lose my great babysitting job!

The tattooed guy shrugged and lit his joint anyway. Sharsted was standing right in front of them both, but they clearly couldn't see him. He looked at the baby in the crib, who went quiet when Linda took her hand out of his diapers. He smiled at the baby, made a peek-a-boo gesture with his finger, and then turned around. By this point, Linda was frozen in place, no doubt due to Raguel's Paresis Spell. He walked right up to Linda and...

“What the...” the guy said, opening his mouth.

...and cut her throat with one strong movement of his hand.

The result of this action could be called impressive: six-foot streaks of blood, thrown from the wound across the room, ruined the luxurious, expensive ash-gray carpet. Linda's eyes and mouth opened in silent shock. She pressed her hand to her throat, but to no avail; the blood continued to spurt vigorously between her fingers, and as she turned, the last few jets hit the tattooed guy in the face, then in the chest, and then straight into his genitals.

Linda dropped dead.

“That’s how it should be,” thought Sharsted.

He threw the knife and left the house.

- Well done, well done! - Raguel celebrated. - There is not even a hint of indecision!

- Yeah, yeah.

“Now these twins will never be born, will never suffer the unfathomable torment you witnessed.” They will not be food for Satan,” Raguel smiled with satisfaction. -You serve God well.

Sharsted winced.

“God,” he thought. “Really?”

- So you want to tell me that God gives the green light to this matter? Does he mind that I caused an innocent woman's miscarriage and then cut a

young girl's throat? I thought that God is all-loving, that he loves everyone, that all people are children of God.

- Oh, that's absolutely true, but you need to read the Bible more. God is not very patient and He has a short temper. In the blink of an eye, God burned Sodom and Gomorrah. In one night He killed all the firstborn males in Egypt. Through the mouth of His Son He cursed Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, and they remain cursed to this day.

“In other words, God gets angry sometimes,” Sharsted said.

- Oh yes, and who can blame Him? People should feel happy that God has not left the Earth completely, but is simply moving His hand through and cleansing the planet. Starts again. Believe me, Mr. Sharsted, the archangels plead with Him several times a year to do just that.

- Okay, then what happened there? - He pointed his thumb behind him. - I just realized that my fingerprints are all over this knife.

- There are none. I will make sure that you are never condemned,” Raguel’s eyes sparkled. - It's just my angelic voodoo. The young man with these ridiculous tattoos - which I think is the right thing to do - will take responsibility.

Sharsted didn't like the idea.

- But he didn’t do it! I did it! This is Florida; people are executed here, not like in California, where they release murderers from prison and give them free apartments! This poor teenager will go to the electric chair if he is found guilty.

Raguel arched an eyebrow at Sharsted.

“Then God’s world will be a better place, won’t it?” This tattooed boy didn't strike me as the Humanitarian of the Year. He will have enough time to find God on death row. And how to express this correctly? - Raguel resolutely raised another finger. “Perhaps you really saved his soul.” Like I said, we'll all be there eventually.

Sharsted adjusted his glasses.

- Fantastic. Where do we go next?

- Now you'll see...

When they turned the corner they should have seen a similar suburban street, but it wasn't.

This guy really has some tricks of his own, Sharsted thought impressed.

They were now walking along a paved road lined with trees on both sides, but ahead of them Sharsted saw several tall, bright street lights pointing above some complex surrounded by a ten-foot-tall chain-link fence. Behind the fence were several office trailers, and behind them a row of parked cement trucks.

One truck was parked closer to the facility, above which stood some kind of tall apparatus, which, via a conveyor, ensured that the truck's barrel was filled with dry cement.

A lone man stood high in the back of the truck with his arms crossed, watching as dry cement was fed into a large funnel that emptied into a barrel. The barrel rotated, the noise of the engine was heard, and the nozzle attached to it sprayed water.

“This,” Raguel began, “is the Adamson Cement and Building Materials Company, and this is Mr. Adamson there, near the entrance to the barrel.” He is a true entrepreneur; he founded this company many years ago after learning the trade as a laborer. After saving a few thousand dollars, he started this business from scratch and now owns a multi-million dollar fortune.

“Well done, captain of industry,” said Sharsted. - Proof that capitalism works.

But he had a bad feeling that Raguel had more to describe than just Mr. Adamson's success story.

“He may seem like a so-called good guy, and he's certainly done a lot of good for his community in terms of volunteer work and charitable donations.” Ah, but this is just an appearance, right? Honestly speaking, the thoughts that the human brain generates, in my opinion, do not allow it to occupy even a cubic inch of space on this planet. He is a pure homosexual; what he did to little boys would make John Wayne Gacy look like a Cub Scout. I don't know how many children he raped and killed, but today it all ends. Thanks to you.

“A guy rapes and kills little boys?” Sharsted thought. “Probably tortures them too.”

He nodded to himself.

"I can do this..."

He clapped his hands.

- Okay, so what? You turn me invisible and I go cut this dude's throat?

“No, no, I’m afraid it’s too easy for Mr. Adamson,” said Raguel. “I have something better for this gentleman.” But first, just so you know for sure...

Raguel handed Sharsted the Blasphemy Scanner; Sharsted looked into it...

The scene he saw through the holes was almost an exact replica of what he first saw: Adamson on the rail at the back of the truck, with the mixing barrel spinning. Only with him was a naked one-year-old boy. The child was still alive, but barely. Adamson held it under his arm with no more effort than a stack of laundry. The magical optical device seemed to automatically bring Adamson's face closer, representing the face of perfect evil.

Adamson calmly pushed the child into the rotating barrel. He then peered in and down with a flashlight for a few moments, then pulled away and - like a psychosexual sociopath - squeezed his own crotch.

Sharsted returned the Blasphemy Scanner.

- Yes, I understood everything. What do you want me to do with him?

Raguel shrugged.

- Just get up there and push him.

- And I will be invisible?

- Yes, you will do it, and I will activate the Paresis Spell so that he cannot resist. Oh, as soon as he is in the barrel, I will stop the Paresis Spell; he will instantly come to his senses, drowning in his own cement. And put this on,” Raguel opened the “tool box”, took out some kind of pendant with an aquamarine and put it on Sharsted’s neck.

- What is this?

- I won’t tell you the real name of this interesting artifact; just think of it as a means of making you a little more attractive. After all, Mr. Sharstead, you're not exactly a spring chicken anymore, are you? - Raguel winked again wittily.

At the same time, Sharsted felt absolutely full of energy, better than he felt at thirty years old.

"Damn! This is some kind of magic!"

- Right now, Mr. Sharsted, you are stronger than several gorillas. You won't know your strength, so show some self-restraint if you want.

There is food for thought. But now was the time to do it.

Sharsted crossed the road and entered the complex through an open chain-link gate.

FOR SERVICE PERSONNEL ONLY - the inscription on the sign made him frown.

"They spelled the staff wrong..."

The steady, abrasive noise of the cement truck grew louder with every step he took closer to the truck. Once there, Sharsted looked at Adamson, who, as Raguel had promised, was unaware of Sharsted's arrival and had not moved a muscle.

Sharsted climbed onto the railing.

- Hey? - he said, hitting Adamson on the thigh. - Cocksucker? Are you really paralyzed?

Indeed, Adamson was...

Then Sharsted pushed Adamson to the side, leaning on the ladder-like handrail, lifted him by the belt and...

- Let's fly, dude...

He threw the millionaire into the opening of the mixing barrel, and that was it. A moment later he heard distorted screams, splashing and an annoying, high-pitched gurgling sound. And a few moments after that?

Nothing.

Sharsted came down without even getting out of breath. Returning to Raguel, he said excitedly:

“You weren’t kidding about that pendant you put on me!” This guy must have weighed at least two hundred pounds, but he looked like a sack of empty peanut shells to me!

“Just another wonderful gift from God, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel replied and led them both out of the area. - Miracles of celestial science! Satan and his witchcraft engineers have devilish science, we have heavenly science, and I can tell you this: we are ahead of everyone in this field,” Raguel smiled. - God bless!

Sharsted looked at his watch. It was 20:24.

“Damn, this night could last forever,” he thought.

- It's time to have some fun, isn't it? - said Raguel.

- Uhhh... - Sharsted couldn't imagine Raguel's idea of 'fun'. - Certainly.

- Close your eyes.

Sharsted closed them, but it took some effort.

- Now open them.

"Damn it! What is this?"

Raguel's magic transported them, literally in the blink of an eye, from the street where the late Mr. Adamson's cement company was located, to the living room of a squalid apartment. One very large African-American man and another large Hispanic man stood to the side with their ridiculously muscular arms crossed. The Latino's T-shirt read: "SCOTCH CAN'T FIX YOUR STUPIDITY, BUT IT CAN Muffle Your Screams." The black guy's T-shirt had a picture of Clint Eastwood and the words "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU UP TO, DOG?" They were apparently waiting for a much smaller white man who was sitting on the couch, bent over a large pile of drugs; he used a popsicle stick to count out individual pills.

“Obviously drug distributors,” Raguel noted. - Two big guys - couriers; the skinny white guy is the boss. And these two women are, as I believe the correct term is, gangster bitches.

Sharsted looked to his left and saw another shabby sofa, on which two skinny, nasty-looking white women were sitting and smoking cigarettes. Not the kind of woman you would bring home to meet your mother.

-Are you ready? - Raguel asked.

- Yes, but... were all these people born evil?

“Well, no,” Raguel pressed the belt to his huge belly. - They are all innocent, victims of a negative environment and a terrible childhood.

Sharstead scratched his head.

- So... what are we going to do? Are we going to kill them?

Raguel looked offended.

- Of course not! But they are still bad people. We're just going to rough them up a little bit.

- But why?

- Because it's fun, Mr. Sharsted! You need a break from killing! So don't destroy them, just give them a good shake.

“Shake,” Sharsted muttered. - Fine.

- Wonderful. Now get ready. I turn off the Invisibility Totem.

Sharsted sighed, waiting. He waited for some sound, sensation or change in pressure, but nothing happened. Suddenly one of the sofa women shouted:

-Where the hell did they come from?

Her T-shirt said "KICK THE PUSS".

-Who the hell is this? - the skinny white guy shouted.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” Raguel announced. - Sorry for the intrusion, but my colleague and I are here to formally introduce ourselves.

The big black guy in the Eastwood shirt grinned and slammed his huge fist into his open palm.

- What the hell is this? The fat guy looks like a giant pear with a thick white head on top.

Raguel bristled.

- Insults are hardly a demonstration of sophistication and goodwill!

The Latino grinned, showing a clichéd gold tooth.

-Who is this skinny old man who looks like a beggar from Caracas?

“I think he means me,” Sharsted suggested.

- Chico! Treadell! - the white guy shouted. - I want these two weirdos thrown out of here and fucked until they tell us who they are!

“They can't be undercover cops,” one of the women said.

- Maybe these two guys are from the Seventeenth Street gang? - the Latino suggested. - Trina really wants to scare us away from our territory.

Black chuckled.

“If these two holes turn out to be the best they've got, we'll soon be running this shitty town.”

Then Treadell, a black man, and Chico, a Hispanic man, stepped forward with evil grins.

Sharsted's initial instincts told him to find a safe place; he stepped aside, looking at the open door to another room. But then he thought:

"What am I running from? I'm stronger than both of these idiots combined!"

Treadell took another step forward.

- All that will be left of you is a pile of crap after I work on your white ass, and then the second Snow Maiden will devour this pile...

- Kill them! - one of the women screamed.

Treadell rushed forward.

Some kind of magical glow in the pendant turned the attacker’s movements into slow motion. A large, black, muscular arm swung as the giant fist moved at lightning speed into a molasses-slow trajectory toward Scharsted's face. Sharsted simply grabbed Treadell's wrist with his left hand, the top of his forearm with his right hand, then lunged forward and...

CLICK!

...broke a man's forearm on the door frame to the next room.

Treadell went down with an impressive thud! His face was deeply lined with sudden agony, and the expression only intensified when Sharsted stepped on his right knee and carefully lifted his right ankle until the knee buckled backwards. This action produced a delicious crunch, like someone eating baked chips.

Treadell fell out of action, roaring.

What about Raguel and his adversary?

“Stop being bad,” Raguel suggested, then leaned down, grabbed Chico's crotch and squeezed. Here another, weaker crunch was heard, and Chico roared with the same hair-raising force as Treadell. “In the near future you will not be able to fertilize any creature on earth,” Raguel assured.

He then ran the tip of his index finger across his thumb, and when that index finger snapped against Chico's jaw, his head jerked to the right, his jaw broke, and most of his teeth flew out of his mouth.

Raguel looked at Sharsted with a humorous remark.

- He probably has health insurance, don't you think?

The rest of the index finger strike sent Chico spinning around the room in the air. He hit the wall hard, leaving a man-shaped dent in the stone, before collapsing onto the shabby floor, bloody at the mouth and unconscious.

Meanwhile, Treadell also fell into a quiet state of unconsciousness.

- Wow! - Sharsted exclaimed. - With this pendant I'm like... Superman!

- Really. But I suspect that Superman has a greater ability than you to remain aware of his surroundings.

- What?

- Behind you!

Sharstead turned just in time to duck. If he hadn't ducked, he would have been hit in the head with a piece of metal pipe wielded by a woman wearing a "KICK THE PUSS" T-shirt. There was no time to think; so Sharsted's most primitive instincts - pardon the pun - worked. And he...

FWAP!

...he kicked the woman right between the legs.

- Bingo! - Raguel exclaimed.

The shabby woman squinted, immediately hunched over, grabbed her groin and fell onto the carpet, strewn with stains and cigarette butts. With

her cheeks heaving, she looked at Sharsted through narrowed eyelids and screamed:

“I think you tore my damn uterus!”

Sharstead shrugged.

- Well, don’t do bad things, and you won’t tear the uterus.

She was still angry.

- What kind of man kicks a woman in the “pussy”?

- Listen, miss. When a woman tries to hit a man on the head with a piece of pipe, that man has the right to kick that woman in the “pussy” with all his might.

- How absolutely true! - Raguel approved.

Sharsted turned to his mentor.

- Hmm, speaking of the environment...

Raguel turned around just in time to find himself face to face with a skinny, stooped white guy, who at the same moment fired a bullet from a large pistol. But the slow motion turned on, and the bullet also slowed down, like in some monotonous, unoriginal Marvel movie, and Raguel easily stepped aside. The bullet hit the wall, came out of the wall, went through the neighbor's front door, flew into the neighbor's bedroom and missed the sleeping neighbor's buttocks by an inch.

Raguel took the white guy's gun and bent it into a weird U shape.

- Shame on you for sneaking up on me like that!

Then he slapped the white guy on the back, the kinetic energy of which caused both of the white guy's eyeballs to pop out of their sockets, after which they hung on frayed nerves like two ping-pong balls on strings. He rolled over the couch, passed out.

“Damn, dude,” Sharsted retorted. - Isn't this overdoing it? I mean, you knocked out his eyeballs.

- Don't worry. EMTs will probably be able to put them back in. And just look at what she says - you just tore that poor woman’s uterus,” Raguel leaned back and laughed heartily. - No more children for her to exchange for drugs!

“Exactly,” Sharsted muttered.

- But you're not done yet, Mr. Sharsted. There's one more scoundrel left, isn't there? - Raguel pointed to the corner of the room.

There, trembling and chattering teeth, stood the second skinny prostitute. Her T-shirt read: "UNWANTED PREGNANCY." With tears in

her eyes, she raised her hands in a hopeless plea.

- Please don't kill me, I beg you. I will do everything...

- Your way out, Mr. Sharsted. Do you want to rip her uterus too? Let's see what you're really made of, shall we?

Sharsted looked at the frightened prostitute.

- Okay, this is how it will be. No more drugs and no more selling them, okay? Stop prostituting yourself and hanging out with crap like these guys? It's clear?

The woman's teeth were still chattering.

- I understand!

“If you ever do anything like that again, I’ll find out about it and then I’ll give you a pussy like no one has ever done in my life,” he pointed to “KICK THE PUSSY.” - If you think she ended badly, you don't know what bad is. It's clear?

- I understand!

- Now get out of here.

- Spa-spa-thank you! - the petrified woman ran out of the house as quickly as any pair of human legs could carry her.

- Well done, Mr. Sharsted! - Raguel exclaimed loudly. - I'm really impressed!

- Well, forgiveness and all that, right?

- Right! This is how God loved the world!

Sharsted rubbed his eyes.

- God, yes. But I mean, look at this,” he pointed at all four unconscious scoundrels in the room. “We did work with these people, but you said they weren’t born evil, right?”

- This is true.

- So you want to tell me that all this chaos is not contrary to God?

- Oh, I don't know, but I do know this: God gives his soldiers - like you and me - some discretionary freedoms. So don't worry about it. We did a lot of good things tonight.

“Yes, but...” he winced, looking at the white guy with his eyes popping out. “I think that’s exactly what we did.” What's next on the agenda?

- Do you want to see real angelic voodoo?

- Yeah, this is starting to get interesting.

Raguel pointed to the large pile of opioids on the table. He raised his hand over the pile and closed his eyes. The tablets simultaneously flew off

the table and floated down the corridor. A moment later, the toilet was heard flushing.

Sharsted's eyes widened.

- Wow... This is amazing! Can I do this?

- In time, Mr. Sharsted. You will be given additional authority as you continue to make progress during your probationary period. And, of course, God understands that time and effort cost money, so... - Raguel took several strips of hundred dollar bills from the table. - God believes that ill-gotten gains confiscated during good deeds are quite appropriate.

Surprised, Sharsted took the strips of bills.

"Cool! Looks like I'm going to buy that 84-inch TV after all. I guess God is a capitalist!"

- It's time for us to go, Mr. Sharsted.

Sirens could be heard in the distance. They walked out of the shitty house, turned around and...

“The evening is getting crazier and crazier,” Sharsted thought.

“It will be a dark story, Mr. Sharstead,” said Raguel.

He led Sharsted down a long, straight, dark road where not a single car was visible. The air pulsed with dense bands of sound from the chirping of crickets and the buzzing of cicadas. Trees stood on both sides of the road.

-Where are we going now?

“The time has come for work, my friend,” said Raguel, “but tell me this. Didn't you enjoy it there?

- What? Beat the crap out of these drug dealers? - Sharsted thought about the question. - Yeah. These guys are a plague to their poor neighborhoods. The pills they sell are killing people on an epidemic scale. They sell drugs to children. They destroy lives for profit. This kind of crap needs to be executed. Come to think of it... - Sharsted looked at Raguel. - Why didn't we just kill them?

“I told you, they weren’t born evil, Mr. Sharstead.” They are no less victims than the people they sell their product to.

Sharsted didn't know if he believed it.

- Yes, okay.

Raguel chuckled.

- But I'm more interested in your typical reaction. This woman is wearing a vulgar T-shirt. You know, she's a victim too. Her childhood defies description,” he raised a finger. - But it doesn’t matter. Wasn't it a relief, I

mean, didn't it give you an incredible feeling of satisfaction to just reach back and kick that ninety-pound hooker right in the vagina?

Sharsted frowned and began to answer:

- No! Of course, but... - he fell silent.

Raguel grinned.

- Come on, admit it, Mr. Sharsted. It was actually fun, wasn't it?

- I, well...

- Do not deceive yourself with false manifestations. Everything is fine. It's quite natural to unleash your best intentions when the occasion calls for it, don't you think?

Sharsted couldn't answer, but he almost grinned, remembering that fat FWAP! - the sound when his foot was between her legs.

- Okay, you caught me. I admit it. Kicking that amphetamine hose into her "pussy" with such force that her uterus ruptured was fun. In fact, it may have been the most fun I've ever had.

- Okay, that's good! Honesty means more than anything!

They walked a little further in the tinsel of the moon, amid a loud chorus of crickets and the occasional cawing of night birds.

“Here we come,” said Raguel.

He stopped on the side of the road and extended his hand to a small clearing adjacent to the path leading into the forest. Sharsted thought he smelled a swamp; he heard distant splashes, as if a fish was jumping out of the water.

“And here is our gentleman,” Raguel confirmed.

Two headlights appeared on the road. Raguel pulled Sharsted behind the trees. Eventually the battered van slowed and pulled out into a clearing.

Raguel glared.

- Disgusting, absolutely disgusting...

Sharsted watched.

A man stepped out of the van, a typical Florida hillbilly. Did Sharsted hear the muffled barking of the dogs?

The redneck opened the back of the van and started driving out.

“No,” Sharsted muttered, noticing the redneck’s T-shirt with the words “PUPPIES FOR YOU.”

“This pride and joy of humanity,” Raguel began, “is a co-owner of the so-called puppy mill.” They breed dogs in deplorable conditions and sell the puppies to pet stores. But, of course, due to frequent forced inbreeding, a

large number of puppies are born sick and with defects; they cannot be sold, so the task of this humanitarian is to get by with them as cheaply as possible.

Sharsted's insides were seething with smoke; he felt his face turn red as he watched the hillbilly throw the puppies out of the back of the van. One puppy had a tumor on his back and another had a huge eye infection. Yet another had a catastrophic outbreak of scabies that left most of his back hairless. And another puppy had only three legs.

- So, this bastard just leaves the puppies in the forest where they will starve to death.

“This is not just a forest, Mr. Sharsted, and they rarely live long enough to starve to death,” Raguel pointed to the road behind them.

Sharsted couldn't help but see the sign: "EVERGLADES STATE PARK - DO NOT FEED OR APPROACH THE ALLIGATORS."

Sharsted might have vomited.

- I'll finish him...

- Wait, wait. You haven’t seen this whole story yet,” Raguel gave Sharsted the Blasphemy Scanner. - Look into the device, Mr. Sharsted, and see what this squire will be doing in a few years...

Sharsted saw the same hillbilly exit the same van in the same location through the Blasphemy Scanner. Hillbilly was now a little fatter—Scharsted figured the puppy business was going well—and he now had one of those mustaches like the members of Metallica.

“Contract murder, Mr. Sharsted,” Raguel said. - But the main reason he does this is not for money, but simply because he is evil. It gives him a thrill, a sexual thrill...

With this glimpse of the future, Sharsted felt as if a gallon of ice water had fallen into his stomach. He saw the hillbilly pull not puppies out of the wagon, but two squealing human babies, grinning maliciously, and then carry them upside down by their ankles, like sacks of potatoes, along the same path to the swamp or some kind of pond...

What followed was something like a transition to cinema. A small lake shimmered in the moonlight in front of him. But in this lake, several pairs of orange eyes were watching what was happening on the shore. The hillbilly dropped both babies and shouted, “The soup is ready!” Babies writhed and cried in the dirty water. As the hillbilly turned away and

returned to the wagon, the four alligators slowly approached where two very tender dishes were waiting for them.

The future collapsed when Sharsted gave the Blasphemy Scanner back to Raguel.

- This guy's ass is already in hell. Make sure I'm not invisible, okay?

- As you say...

Sharsted crossed the path. The hillbilly drove the puppies away from the road and along the path. The barking had decreased significantly, which was not a good sign.

- What do you want? - asked the hillbilly, noticing Sharsted.

FWAP!

Sharsted kicked the hillbilly right between the legs. The villager's eyes widened and he fell. All he could do in response was gasp, clutching his crotch.

- No more dog killings, asshole. And you won't kill a single child - thanks to me.

Sharsted grabbed the man by the throat and dragged him, gasping and gurgling, down the path. But his heart sank when he reached the shore. There were no more puppies, just a few dog parts, like paws and tails, and even one small boxer head. Several alligators slipped into the water; their bellies looked quite full.

- You're a bastard! You're a pile of trash! - Sharsted shouted.

He wanted to step on the guy's head and split it open like a coconut, but...

"It's too good for him."

He deliberately disregarded Raguel's previous remarks about good intentions; nevertheless, he pulled the redneck's pants off, instantly grabbed his penis and balls by the root and tore them out of his groin. He then threw the severed genitals into the water, where the fleshy mass was swallowed whole by a stray alligator.

Of course, this peaceful, quiet, moonlit night was quickly interrupted by the agonized cries of the hillbilly, but even more agony followed when...

CRACK!

...when Sharsted folded a man in half backwards and broke his spine, leaving him shivering paralyzed in the dirty water.

He shouted to the lake:

- The soup is ready!

Just at the moment when several more alligators headed towards the shore, looking at the new prey, soaked in the fragrant fresh blood.

- Fuck this shit, man! - Sharsted complained when he returned to the road. - All these puppies were eaten.

- I'm afraid the world has become a sad place since Lucifer and his accomplices have established themselves. But at least you can take solace in the fact that this despicable village nonentity will also be eaten. And there is even more comfort in the certainty that no child will ever suffer a similar fate.

Sharsted muttered something under his breath.

"That was no consolation. This sucks. This world is a piece of crap. How can you feed puppies to alligators?"

- Yes, Mr. Sharsted. The world seems like a terrible place, but sometimes - sometimes - it really is beautiful if you look closely.

- Fabulous! So which devil worshiping scumbag will I kill next? I can't fucking wait!

As they walked, the road and the trees on both sides seemed to dissolve into nothing but bright white stars, like luminous spots in the sky. That's all Sharsted could see, no matter where he looked, even down; it seemed as if he and Raguel were walking weightlessly across the endless skies.

“So God really exists,” Sharsted admitted to himself. “And He really created everything, all of it: from every star in the Universe to every microorganism in the sea and every molecule everywhere.”

How could he not believe it now, after everything he had witnessed in just the last twenty-four hours?

Light seemed to come from Raguel's eyes.

- Yes, such a beautiful place, in fact a paradise, full of wonder and joy, full of bunnies, flowering plants, chirping birds, snow-capped mountains, lush green pastures, stunning waterfalls, indescribable sunrises - all of it. And then we have Satan and his accomplices, who exist only to destroy it all. Why do they want to destroy it? Because God did all this for His flock, and Satan will not stand for it. He was so humiliated and angry when God cast him out of Heaven that he would devote thousands of years to desecrating all that was beautiful.

“Yes,” Sharsted said, still bristling from the incident with the puppies. - Fuck Satan and everyone on his side, I'd like to throw them all in a wood

chipper and take a shower of their blood and guts.

Raguel raised his eyebrows.

“That's a very strong level of commitment, Mr. Sharsted, but I have to say... your level of determination is a little untrustworthy so far.”

- Doesn’t inspire confidence? Sharsted chuckled. “You just made me slit the throat of a teenage babysitter, but I’m a little untrustworthy?”

- Well, I didn’t force you. You chose to do this of your own free will, all for the sake of opposing evil and glorifying all that is good.

- Fabulous...

Sharsted remained content, no matter how crazy it seemed. He knew he would cut the throats of thousands of evil teenage babysitters if it made the world any better.

“I’m a little tormented, Raguel,” he admitted. - What's next on the agenda?

Just as the words left Sharsted's mouth, their stunning wandering through the depths of space disappeared and transformed into...

Now he was standing on the balcony of a high-rise building. Where exactly, he didn't know, but now it occurred to him that it didn't really matter. He looked out from a dizzying cityscape with flickering lights and streets beating like illuminated arteries throughout the urban environment.

“Let’s go,” Raguel suggested and opened the sliding glass door.

When they entered, they were greeted with plenty of luxury: a spacious room decorated with plush dark carpeting, expensive furniture, and what could only be a millionaire's entertainment center.

How sweet, Sharsted thought.

- The owner of this luxurious home is a gentleman named Cornelius Van Houter. He hides his astronomical profits from forced labor enterprises in third world countries behind a quagmire of fake charities and fake hedge funding,” Raguel's expression and demeanor darkened with sudden solemnity. - To be honest, the things that this man made are absolutely impossible to sell at retail; they make me want to fall to my knees and cry like a baby.

Sharsted became alarmed.

- Wow, this must be really bad.

“Oh, it is, I assure you, it is...” Raguel waved his hand forward in a “right here” gesture. - We should go there.

They entered the master bedroom, which was larger than the entire Sharsted house. One corner was occupied by a spacious hot tub, and two people were relaxing in it with glasses of wine in their hands. One was a middle-aged woman.

“She’s a call girl, one of his favorites,” Raguel said. - Actually harmless. And there...

Also sitting in the bathtub was a tanned, cheerful man of about fifty plus with piercing eyes and stylish gray temples.

- This is your task, honorable Monsieur Van Houter. Looks like nothing more than a serious businessman, doesn't it? But he is also a serious Satanist.

- Really? You mean he, like, dresses up in a black cloak with a hood and prays in front of an altar of black candles with a pentagram and everything?

- All this and more, Mr. Sharsted. It may seem cliché to you, but Van Houter and his ilk are unwavering in their loyalty to their master, for it is to that master that he owes his wealth and power.

Sharstead shrugged.

“I hate to say it, but he looks like a horny older dick sitting in a hot tub with a hooker.” I can't imagine him performing at a Lucifer concert in stupid costumes and people wearing fake horns.

Raguel smiled silently and handed Sharsted the Blasphemy Scanner.

When Sharsted looked, he saw a parody of a Black Mass that looked like something out of a cheesy movie: a grotto lit by flickering black candles and a stone altar erected by a semicircle of people in black cloaks and hoods. Hanging from each participant's neck were necklaces with pentagrams, planetary symbols, signs and, of course, the most common of all - inverted crosses.

“This will happen on the eve of Rudmas, in three nights,” said Raguel.

Sharsted felt confused.

"Rudmas, shmudmas. It's not like there's anything worth killing Van Houter for. He's just playing Halloween with a bunch of stupid hangers-on."

“Look,” said Raguel.

One figure stepped away from the others and lowered its hood. It was Van Houter. The man raised his hands in some kind of pompous gesture, then nodded and...

Sharstead shuddered in place.

Right in front of the altar, six newborn babies of all colors fell from the ceiling. Tiny creatures were spinning in the air with puffy faces and could not make a sound.

"Why is there no noise?"

Simply because they were hung by their necks from piano wires.

“Van Houter buys babies in the city ghettos,” Raguel said. - What could be a more perfect embodiment of evil than the production of drugs so powerful that drug-addicted mothers will sell their children as sacrificial fodder for such endeavors?

Sharsted swallowed as he looked at the ugly sight. One by one, the babies' struggles stopped, leaving them hanging limply. Untouched blood flowed down their tiny bodies, down their legs and dripped from their tiny feet, pouring into bowls placed on the floor.

“And he has done this countless times in the past,” Raguel continued. - But now? Vengeance is mine, as the Lord says.

Sharsted pushed the Blasphemy Scanner away in horror.

- Let me strangle him with piano wire. I'll do it very slowly...

“No, I think you’ll like this device much more,” Raguel opened his “tool box” and took out a single tiny stone that looked yellowish. “This is real sulfur, Mr. Sharstead, and not just any old piece of sulfur, but sulfur from hell.” It is very difficult for those of us who are on God's side to provide this for ourselves. But here it is, after much suffering,” he placed the pebble in Sharsted’s palm.

- And what should I do about it?

Raguel winked.

“Just throw him in the hot tub when I tell you to, but I need to get her out of there first.” She's innocent.

Sharsted watched with a questioning gaze as his mentor approached the hot tub. By this time, Van Houter and his mistress were paralyzed and unaware. Raguel began to pull the woman out of the bath by a lock of her wet blonde hair.

- Seriously? For the hair? - Sharsted exclaimed, shuddering. - It's quite insulting to an innocent person, isn't it?

Raguel looked up and smiled joyfully.

- Insulting towards a prostitute?

The now naked woman was half out of the bathtub, lifting her hips up. Sharsted had no choice but to notice that there was a lush strand of curly

hair growing on her pubic area.

- Is it so offensive? - Raguel went further, now he grabbed the woman by the pubic hair and pulled her out of the bath.

Sharsted winced.

“I didn’t know angels could be such misogynists...

Raguel released his grip; the woman's body plopped wetly onto the tiled floor.

- Misogynist? And I hear this from an outstanding luminary who just recently kicked a woman - your word, not mine - in the “pussy”. Oh, for God's sake, Mr. Sharsted. Relax. Trust me, this passed out whore doesn't feel a thing,” he paused for effect. “Now please throw this pebble into the hot bath where Mr. Van Houter is enjoying the last minutes of his life.” I will immediately remove the Paresis Spell.

Sharsted couldn't imagine what to expect. He sighed, exhaled and threw the pebble into the hot bath.

PLUH!

In the time it takes for someone to snap their fingers once, the water in the hot tub boils furiously. A huge white cloud of steam rose up and was so hot that Sharsted had to step back. Mr. Van Houter's screams were so loud that it seemed as if his innermost soul was being torn out. In a matter of seconds, the man turned lobster red, swollen from head to toe, and blistered. Manic convulsions turned him into a bouncing, screaming riot of agony. His irises turned dull white, like a hard-boiled egg. Driven by the torment of the damned, Van Houter shuddered as he tried to crawl out of the bath.

- He's crawling out! - Sharsted exclaimed.

- And what should we do when he crawls out, Mr. Sharsted? - Raguel winked again. - We'll just push him back!

Sharsted was not too happy about this prospect, but then his assessment changed when he remembered the six newborn babies hanging from the strings of the piano. He raised his right foot, placed the bottom of his Velcro sneakers against Van Houter's smoking head, pushed him and...

PLUME!

...and he went back into the seething water. Moments later, the millionaire was performing a "dead man's float" in the violently churning water. The entire top of his head was a wet, hairy blister.

With another snap of the finger, the water stopped boiling; in fact, the heat was no longer even felt.

“I'd say Mr. Van Houter is finished,” Raguel said, rubbing his hands.

The lingering aroma reminded Sharsted of his dear grandmother's chicken noodle soup.

Raguel pointed to the middle of the bath.

“Now, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to bring a pebble, but you don’t have to worry, the water is now at room temperature.”

Sharsted hesitated, but then shrugged.

"He has never deceived me yet." Wincing, he stepped into the warm, protein-rich soup that was water and walked past Van Houter's floating body. A side glance provided the perfect angle to see that the previous ultra-high temperature had forced the corpse's intestines out through the mouth. They floated palely like giant udon noodles.

Worse, there was some imbalance of buoyancy - possibly dying gases - and this caused Van Houter's corpse to turn over in the water, belly up. Fortunately, Sharsted's consciousness did not allow him to look at the face of the deceased, but by chance he still caught an involuntary glance at the man's scrotum...

“Oh, damn!” Sharsted thought. “Look at his ball sack!”

Which had already swelled to the size of a volleyball, but alas, it was a maroon volleyball. The water temperature was so intense that Van Houter's "egg sack" became filled with blood. And then the blood turned into a semi-solid puree.

That's when Sharsted vomited violently into the water. Cursing, he bent down, took the pebble and jumped back out.

“Thank you,” said Raguel. He put the pebble back in the "toolbox". - It can only be used every seventy-seven days - it needs time to recharge.

- How... how big a pool can this thing bring to a boil?

Raguel smiled.

- Do you really want to know this, Mr. Sharsted?

- Well, yes, I think so. Like a community pool?

Raguel, still smiling, shook his head.

- More.

- Maybe an Olympic size pool?

- No, Mr. Sharsted. You think too small. Try Lake Superior. And if you want to see real climate change, throw that little idiot into the Arctic Ocean and see what happens.

Just a note, Sharsted thought, DO NOT do this.

Raguel nodded approvingly towards Van Houter's scarlet corpse.

- I'm glad to announce that our friend will miss his little party on Rudmas Eve.

“Yes, but wait a minute,” Sharsted said. - There were other Satanists there. How do you know they won't keep hanging these babies from piano wire?

Raguel looked at his watch and discovered that it was a Mickey Mouse watch.

“You can be sure that by now all of Mr. Van Houter's henchmen have been destroyed - as I think it is correct to say - eliminated.

- Who?

- By whom? Other performers.

This piqued Sharsted's curiosity.

- Oh, so I'm not the only one.

- That's definitely true, Mr. Sharsted. The moment the Heavenly Congress received the go-ahead for the new law, every Kaliginaut in Heaven was sent to Earth to recruit executors. What was that great old Jerry Lee Lewis song? "There will be a lot of carnage!" - then Raguel looked this way and that, pulled himself together, patted himself on the chest and said: - It's time for us to go, but before we go, I need you to drag our poor prostitute onto the balcony and throw her over the railing.

Sharsted reacted as if he had been hit in the head.

- What? No! I won't do this! - He looked at the blonde, middle-aged, unconscious woman with a real mop of toffee-colored pubic hair. - This is not right! It's not her fault! She doesn't deserve to die!

Raguel took a deep breath.

- Please, Mr. Sharsted, calm down. I'm kidding. Has all the fun drained from this desolate world? Let's move on to our next walk,” he looked carefully at Sharsted.

- This will be our last evening, after which I - as I think it’s right - will release you alone to your new divine duties...

Sharsted followed Raguel out of Van Houter's large bedroom, turned and immediately found himself in a brightly lit and very sterile tiled-floored hallway, where Raguel stood hunched over, his huge belly hanging down, repeatedly pulling the handle of a vending machine. He then used the machine to collect at least seven Kit Kat bars.

- Seriously? Sharsted asked, confused. -Are you going to eat seven Kit Kats?

Raguel frowned, as if offended by the harsh slander.

- Well, Mr. Sharsted, I'm hungry, and these Kit-Kat bars satisfy me quite well.

- Yes, of course, but... seven?

- Seven is a sacred number, and six proves the number of error - the number of Lucifer. This is the number of eternal darkness. Seven is the number of eternal light.

"We're talking about damn candy bars!" - Sharsted grumbled to himself.

-Did you at least pay for them?

- Of course not...

- So you stole them. Is this an example that an angel should set?

Raguel's thick lips wrinkled.

- God created this world for you, for people. And since I serve your Creator, that means I can use everything that God has provided for you. Is this reasonable, Mr. Sharsted?

- Let me get this right. God said you could steal Kit Kat bars?

- Yes, Mr. Sharstead, it was so. He also said that I can destroy any person I want. If a person gets on my nerves, then I can wipe that person off the face of this beautiful planet. Did I satisfy your curiosity?

Sharsted quickly fell silent.

- Oh, yes, yes. I was just theorizing. I didn't mean to get on your nerves.

“Okay,” Raguel began eating his Kit Kat bars, two at a time.

They disappeared within a minute.

"What a glutton..."

- I heard it, Mr. Sharsted.

"Damn it!"

- No, I said that I was eager to punish another bastard!

- Ahh...

- So where are we now? - further down the corridor he saw something similar to a nurse’s station. - Is this a hospital?

- Yes, that's right, and we have an urgent meeting right around this corner...

On the way, they passed several doctors with the proverbial stethoscopes, several nurses, a janitor wheeling a bucket to his next class, and an orderly rushing down the hallway pushing a withered old man on a gurney. Raguel's invisibility totem continued to act as an amulet, hiding them.

After about ten yards they stopped at another nurse's station.

“Mama Mia,” Sharsted thought, looking at several nurses.

They stood huddled around the reception desk, chatting and showing each other photos on their phones. There were three of them, and their existence demonstrated a true triple ideal of female beauty in the 21st century.

“Damn!” Sharsted thought, noticing that he was staring at them. “Tits, asses and screaming camel toes. What’s wrong with me?”

“Stop coveting those nurses,” Raguel warned. - These are not pieces of meat that serve as fuel for masturbation. They are God's creations and it is obscene and rude of you to project your unbridled lust onto them. You are insulting your friendship with the Lord.

"God's work, okay. But I bet these girls have seen more dick than Stormy Daniels."

- Yes, of course, but look at them.

- I'm serious, Mr. Sharsted. Please listen to me carefully,” Raguel unconsciously sported a spot of Kit Kat chocolate at the corner of his mouth, which completely usurped his efforts to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. -Have you ever heard of the Whiskey 79 warhead?

This increased Sharsted's attention.

- No, but... it doesn't sound good.

There was a tiny click as Raguel made some adjustments to the Blasphemy Scanner. - Look into both eyes, as the British seem to say.

- What? Both...

- Just look already!

Sharsted looked into the holes and saw a sharp image of what looked like an artillery shell standing on end. The projectile was painted a smooth olive-gray color, had a white stripe at the top and a shiny black tip. As Sharsted squinted, the image enlarged to some stenciled lettering on the side of the case that very clearly read: US ARMY PROPERTY, ONE UNIT - W79 AFAP - POWER SELECTABLE, 1.1-100 CT - EXPLOSIVE FORCE - M735 - SELECTABLE.

“Uh-uh...” said Sharsted. - I don't like what I see...

Finally Raguel wiped the chocolate stain and licked it off his finger.

- This is an obsolete nuclear artillery shell, Mr. Sharsted. More than five hundred examples were manufactured and stored in warehouses for many years, but in the early nineties they were dismantled in Texas as part of a disarmament agreement. Of course, you won't be surprised to learn that your treacherous government has secretly created many more, more advanced, similar munitions. Be that as it may, and as I already said, about five hundred pieces were dismantled, but one, I'm afraid, was cleverly hidden by an enterprise wishing to cause as much harm as possible...

“Terrorists,” Sharsted suggested.

- No, worse. Satanists. Thirty-four years later, the stolen warhead would be detonated in the back room of a stationery store near the White House. The Red Chinese will be to blame for this,” one of Raguel’s eyebrows flew up, just like Mr. Spock’s. -Can you guess what will happen next?

Sharsted's lower lip trembled.

- Uh-uh... Third World War?

- Yes, Mr. Sharsted. World War III. Tens of millions will die. Entire cities will be destroyed. Entire cultures will be essentially destroyed. And all because of one man, one servant of Lucifer.

“So I’ll have to kill this guy before he does it,” Sharsted calculated.

- Yes.

Sharsted nodded.

- Fine. Very simple. Give it to me.

It was here that Raguel showed a smile that seemed completely vile to him.

-Your enthusiasm is commendable. Follow me, he's here.

However, Sharsted's stomach dropped sharply when he noticed a sign on the glass door they were about to pass by.

MATERNITY DEPARTMENT.

"Oh no! Another baby..."

There were at least twenty small birthing cribs scattered around the room, each containing a plump little bundle of joy wrapped in a diaper.

Sharsted looked at all those cute faces.

"And I'll have to kill one of them. Can I really do that?"

- Nothing is easy, Mr. Sharsted. If you don't believe me, ask Job, ask Daniel, ask St. Ignatius. The latter was sentenced to be torn to pieces by hungry dogs for praising Jesus and refusing to worship the ridiculous Roman gods. But the Romans gave him a choice. "Deny Jesus and you will be forgiven. You can go free." Saint Ignatius said no. And they threw him to the dogs with a smile on their face. It's hard to do, even harder than what I told you about.

Sharsted swallowed. He was sweating and shaking.

- Fine. Which one?

“Oh, if only everything were so simple,” said Raguel.

He waved to one of the

babies; the baby burped.

- We think of God as omniscient, the One who knows everything. But this is essentially true only when you understand the details. After all, why would God send His Only Begotten Son to provide salvation for all mankind if He knew in advance who would be saved and who would not?

Sharsted began to sense something was wrong.

-What are you talking about?

Raguel cleared his throat.

“What I'm saying, Mr. Sharsted, is this: we know that one of the babies in this room will start the most destructive war in the history of mankind. But... - and then he raised his notorious fat finger again. - We don't know exactly what kind of child it is.

Sharsted, sticking out his lower lip, stared blankly at Raguel.

- AND?

“Which means, Mr. Sharsted, and I’m very sorry to bring this disconsolate news, you will have to kill every child in this maternity ward.”

- Fuck you! - Sharsted exploded. - This is outrageous!

“Perhaps, but this is also your divine task.” There's nothing I can do.

“I will not destroy a room full of children just because you, an incompetent idiot, don’t know the right child!”

Raguel looked back sternly.

- This is God's will.

-If killing all these babies is God's will, then God is a moron! And He's an asshole! And you too!

Raguel smiled, lowering his head and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

- Gotcha again, Mr. Sharsted. Of course I'm joking...

Sharsted nearly fainted.

- Stop this shit, dude! What, are you in high school? This is not funny!

- Oh, this is incredibly funny, and that is why God gave us a sense of humor. How boring would life be without this, huh?

Sharsted shook his head and ground his teeth.

- Kiss my damn ass!

Raguel grinned so hard his cheeks turned pink.

“Your reaction is worth all the gold in King Croesus’s vaults.” You need to relax, I think, because this way you may not pass the probationary period.

Sharsted wanted to kick Raguel in the balls, but... changed his mind.

“No, Mr. Sharstead, you are expected to kill only one child in this room,” Raguel put his hand on the edge of the crib. - This child.

Sharsted looked at the child. He was wrapped in a blanket filled with smiling elephants and turtles and grinned happily at Sharsted.

-You have to be kidding me! This is the cutest baby in this whole damn place!

- Agree! He likes you, Mr. Sharsted. He thinks you are his father!

- Stop talking nonsense!

- How ironic, huh? You're not actually his father. You are his executioner. You are the Shadow of Death.

"What am I doing? How did I even get involved with this fat idiot?"

There was a sign on the crib that said "FORBES, BENTLEY" with a set of numbers.

"Bentley. Am I really going to KILL Bentley?"

He looked longer at the child, who was now blowing bubbles, and grinned at Sharsted.

“I... I don’t think I can do this,” he admitted.

- Okay, Mr. Sharsted. This won't be the first child you've killed today.

- Yes, but I didn't need to look at that child. It was in the belly of that seedy hillbilly,” he looked again. - No. I don't think I can do this.

- Well then, let me ask you this very hackneyed question. If you knew what would follow, could you bring yourself to destroy Adolf Hitler while still a newborn?

- Yes. But this is different.

- How is it different? The only difference is that this little Bentley will kill many more people than Hitler and cause much more destruction,

hardship and horror.

- I don't know why everything is different, it just is!

“Stop beating around the bush, as I would say,” Raguel urged. “Just wrap your arms around this cutie’s neck and choke the little asshole.” If you don't do this, he will bring destruction to the world and all its people. It will be apocalyptic.

Raguel's words continued to ring heavily in Sharsted's head.

“Destruction of the world,” he thought. “Tens of millions of dead...”

Sharsted sighed nervously and began to lower his shaking hands, but then...

- So... I have to do this kind of thing for the rest of my life?

- We'll have to.

-But you can't tell me how long I'll live?

- Well, I can, but I don't think it's a good idea.

- Why?

- Because your consent is a manifestation of faith. It doesn't matter when you die.

Sharsted's head was spinning at these words.

- But if you wanted, could you tell me when I die?

Raguel gave a sign.

- Yes. But it doesn't matter.

- It matters to me! Tell me when I die so I'll know how long I'll have to do this!

Raguel grinned.

- Very good, Mr. Sharsted. It goes against my common sense, but... you will die in mid-March at the age of seventy-nine.

"Seventy-nine! That will be in fifteen years! I still have many years to live!"

- And don't get me wrong, Mr. Sharsted. You won't have to exterminate hellborn every day. Just occasionally, and very few of them will be babies. This is truly an amazing circumstance, since you will always be protected from any harm,” Raguel pointed to Sharsted’s pendant. “And you will be endowed with impressive supernatural powers.” Not to mention, you are allowed to keep all the money and valuables you have obtained from the hell-born. You will be fabulously rich.

"Oh, man. This just keeps sounding better and better!"

Raguel continued with a smile.

- You can move out of your house with cockroaches and move anywhere. If you so choose, you can live in a luxury apartment on the West Side of Manhattan. And... - another expressive finger flew up, - your salvation is guaranteed. There will be no place for you in Purgatory. You will be taken directly to Heaven at the moment of your passing. This is your reward from God for the fact that all your life you have been a reasonable moralist, a decent, compassionate person. Very few people are given this opportunity.

It worked. Sharstead cracked his knuckles.

"Okay. Let's just do it."

He tried not to look at little Bentley's face, but some cruel synapse in his brain forced him to do so. He reached down and carefully wrapped his hands around the child's throat. The throat felt tiny. He could feel his veins pulsating.

- One, two, three, squeeze, Mr. Sharsted, and it'll be over. Squeeze hard and you will disconnect the baby's head from the spine. Death will be instantaneous and completely painless.

Sharsted's teeth chattered.

“One, two, three, squeeze, one, two, three, squeeze,” he repeated to himself over and over again.

But...

But the commands of his brain refused to be transferred to his hands. He looked at little Bentley again. The child grinned at him brilliantly and said:

- Goo! Ga-ah!

Sharsted stepped back, looked into Raguel's eyes and said:

- Sorry. I can't do this. Fire me. I want to leave.

- Take a moment to compose yourself, Mr. Sharsted. Give yourself time to reflect on the seriousness of the matter and show the appropriate enthusiasm and attitude.

“Nope,” according to Sharsted, everything was decided. - I can’t do this and I won’t. You have the wrong assistant. I'm not the right person for this job.

Raguel's stern expression tripled.

- You are sure?

- To him.

Raguel stopped, stone-faced.

- I'll ask again. You are sure? Are you absolutely sure you want to terminate our agreement? There will be no second chance.

“This is evil...” Sharsted drawled out the words.

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Raguel. - This child is evil. This is the very embodiment of evil and the forerunner of the Antichrist. Don't let yourself be deceived. This is part of Lucifer's machinations to hide his true goals under such camouflage,” Raguel extended his hand to point at the adorable baby. - Be a steadfast Christian soldier. Save the world.

Sharsted took a deep breath and then thought:

"Again".

He put his hands on the child's throat, closed his eyes and squeezed.

The child began to choke; his pulse jumped, the sudden increase of which Sharsted felt with his fingers. Stronger, stronger...

This action threw images into his head like coal into a furnace. Under a shiny black veil, Sharsted watched as SS soldiers tossed babies back and forth, catching them on bayonets, each soldier letting out a black laugh.

Then, in front of a huge stone statue with the head of a bull, the Carthaginian priests spent the whole day throwing living babies, one after another, into a deep trench, where a far-rising wood flame roared.

He then noticed a massive dumpster one hundred feet long, ten feet high, and twenty deep, full of countless screaming naked babies, hundreds and hundreds, while a man, darkened by obsidian shadows, looked down from the car window and pressed a button; the dumpster was not a dumpster, it was an industrial trash compactor, and as its walls collapsed under the deafening noise of the machine, the living contents of the compactor slowly turned into human mush, and the sounds of all those dying babies came down and down and down like a magnificent melody that would make Satan himself smile, and the man in the machine who pressed the button was Sharsted.

Sharsted let go of the child's throat.

- No. I refuse to do this.

Raguel looked around sadly and sank down heavily.

- So be it.

"Yes. Damn, I need a rest..."

Raguel raised his hand, and with some twist of his angelic "mojo", the pendant lifted from Sharsted's neck, then flew into the air and landed in Raguel's hand.

- You won't need this anymore.

- No, I definitely won’t need it. Give it to the next guy.

Raguel hid the pendant back in his "toolbox".

- It's a pity, Mr. Sharsted. I was starting to like you. This is not something I have ever experienced with people.

“I started to like you too,” Sharsted shook his head. - But I can't kill babies.

- Your right. Good luck to you, Mr. Sharsted.

- You too.

Sharsted emerged from the maternity ward with such relief as if the entire weight of the Pyramids of Giza had been lifted from his shoulders.

Before the door closed behind him, he took a long look back over his shoulder and saw Raguel leaning over little Bentley's crib and placing his hands in it. He heard soft gurgling sounds as the door closed completely.

"Well... What a night, huh?" - he asked himself and went.

It was just a few minutes before 9 p.m. when he realized he was walking back down Seminole Boulevard to his apartment. The traffic hummed back and forth; several pedestrians were seen walking merrily somewhere; the plane flew silently over the endless sea of stars. Shops and restaurants were lit and full of normal life.

Sharsted smiled.

“And if Raguel is not a big liar, I have another fifteen years to live, and after that I will die and go to Purgatory, and whatever I have to do to get out of Purgatory...” he shrugged. “I will do it. I think I will pray a lot. Thank God and all that...”

Then he decided that this was a nice bonus when he mistakenly reached into his pocket and discovered that it was stuffed with two strips of hundred-dollar bills that had been given to him at a drug den.

"Oh! What a beautiful day!"

And then...

KUR-KLANK!

...then he was hit on the road by a red Mitsubishi Eclipse and a tattooed young woman in a food delivery hat.

He happily walked through a traffic light at the same crossing where a man in a wheelchair had previously been hit. As if in a tawdry Hollywood thriller, he felt himself being pulled in slow motion under the front bumper of the car, gradually sinking under the wheels of the car, he heard the

crunch of his bones and watched as the lower part of the car flashed before his amazed gaze.

The rear wheels threw him out into the street after the car. Broken and battered, his cheek pressed to the asphalt, he could watch the Mitsubishi Eclipse speed up and turn sharply to the right at the next corner, its tires squealing.

"Am I dead? An example of obvious deception?"

No.

Sharsted woke up a few days later in a comfortable hospital bed; therefore, he was not essentially lied to.

However, he was paralyzed from the neck down, unable to even speak, and it was in this state that he remained until his death in mid-March at the age of seventy-nine, immediately after which he found himself in the pitch darkness of Purgatory, where he would likely spend the next couple of thousand years listening to distant chatter and groans, floating without feeling movement up, down, right or left, and cowering every time a pair of dry, dusty hands appeared and pawed at him mercilessly in the face.

There will be many such pairs of hands, and they will visit him regularly.

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